

# ASSYRIAN RELIEFS AND IVORIES

IN THE  
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

# ASSYRIAN RELIEFS AND IVORIES IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART:

Palace Reliefs of Assurnasirpal II  
and Ivory Carvings from Nimrud

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# CONTENTS

FOREWORD <i>Philippe de Montebello</i>	4
CHRONOLOGY	6
INTRODUCTION <i>Vaughn E. Crawford</i>	7
THE RELIEFS <i>Prudence O. Harper; Holly Pittman</i>	16
The Official Rooms of the Northwest Palace	16
The Images Carved on the Reliefs	21
Color	27
Garment Patterns	28
The Standard Inscription	31
IVORY CARVINGS FOUND AT NIMRUD <i>Holly Pittman</i>	35
Styles	36
MISSIONARIES SEND BAS-RELIEFS TO THE UNITED STATES <i>Dorothea Seelye Franck</i>	40
BIBLIOGRAPHY	47

# FOREWORD

The Metropolitan Museum of Art houses monumental, majestic, and important works of art from the ancient world. In particular, a group of Assyrian sculptures from the Northwest Palace at Nimrud, which was constructed during the reign of Assurnasirpal II (883-859 B.C.), is remarkable both for its artistic excellence and for its technical skill. Excavated at Nimrud in the mid-nineteenth century by Sir Austen Henry Layard, an English archaeologist, the majority of these impressive, larger-than-life-size reliefs and sculptures came to the Metropolitan Museum in 1932 as gifts of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., one of the Museum's most generous supporters. Other Assyrian pieces were gifts to the Museum in 1917 from J. Pierpont Morgan, another major figure in the Metropolitan's history. An earlier donor, Benjamin Brewster, began the Museum's collection of Assyrian reliefs with a gift in 1884.

Over the years the Metropolitan's Assyrian sculptures have been housed in several locations. In 1933, shortly after the arrival of the Rockefeller gift, two statues from palace doorways – a lion and a bull with wings and human heads – were installed in a prominent position at the south end of the Great Hall, where they heraldically flanked the entrance to the Cesnola Gallery containing Cypriot art. Several of the reliefs were installed at that time in the small rooms to the east of the gallery. There they remained until the summer of 1957.

In 1961 two new galleries of Ancient Near Eastern art were opened in the Museum's north wing, and the Assyrian sculptures could be viewed in a display arranged by Charles K. Wilkinson, curator of the department, that closely reflected their original positions at Nimrud. In 1968, prior to the beginning of construction on the Lila Acheson Wallace Galleries of Egyptian Art, most of the Ancient Near Eastern works were placed in storage. Now, as the first stage in the reinstallation of permanent galleries for the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, the Assyrian sculptures may again be enjoyed in a gallery setting that reflects their original placement in the Northwest Palace at Nimrud.

We are deeply grateful to Raymond and Beverly Sackler for the generous donation that made this possible. Prudence O. Harper, Curator,



View of 1900 installation of Assyrian sculpture in  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, was primarily responsible for the installation. She was ably assisted by Holly Pittman, Assistant Curator, Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. This large new gallery bears the name of its donors: The Raymond and Beverly Sackler Gallery for Assyrian Art.

PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO  
*Director*

# CHRONOLOGY

Dates for Near East from J. A. Brinkman, in A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 335-352.

## Greece

**1400 B.C.** Mycenaean domination of Eastern Mediterranean

**c. 1230** Destruction of Troy

**490** Persian defeat at Marathon

**480** Persian defeat at Salamis

**401** Battle of Cunaxa. Retreat of the Ten Thousand led by Xenophon

## Near East

**1813-1781 B.C.** Shamshi-Adad, king of Assyria

**1792-1750** Hammurabi, king of Babylon

**c. 1650-1500** Old Hittite kingdom, Anatolia

**1595** Hittites attack Babylon

**1400-1200** Hittite Empire

**c. 1000-960** David, king of Israel

**c. 960-930** Solomon, king of Israel

**850-600** Urartean kingdom, Anatolia

**1000-600** Neo-Assyrian Period

**883-859** Assurnasirpal II establishes capital at Nimrud

**721-705** Sargon, king of Assyria

**704-681** Sennacherib, king of Assyria

**668-627** Assurbanipal, king of Assyria

**614, 612** Destructions of Nimrud

**640-330** Achaemenid Dynasty, Iran

**559-530** Cyrus II, the Great, king of Iran

**522-486** Darius I, king of Iran

**485-465/4** Xerxes, king of Iran

## Egypt

**1991-1633 B.C.** Middle Kingdom. Dynasties 12, 13

**1633-1559** Second Intermediate Period. Dynasties 14-17

Hyksos control eastern Nile delta

**1570-1200** New Kingdom. Dynasties 18-19

**1320-1200** Battles in Syria between Egypt and Hittites

**1085-719** Third Intermediate Period. Dynasties 21-24

**671, 663** Assyrians invade Egypt

**525-404** Dynasty 27. Persian domination of Egypt

**341-332** Dynasty 31. Persian domination of Egypt

# INTRODUCTION

**A**ssur was the name of a god, a city, a land, and, in another form, the name of a people – the Assyrians. The god Assur was the national deity. The city Assur was the first capital. The land Assur was the home of the Assyrians.

Assyria was located in what is now northern Iraq (Fig. 1). The archaeological remains of the ancient city of Assur overlook the Tigris River about sixty miles south of the modern city of Mosul. The region was a ready migration path for nomadic tribes following the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. Passes through the Zagros Mountains on the present-day border between Iraq and Iran offered inviting roads in both directions. Thus, in ancient as well as modern times, Assyria was traversed by well-traveled crossroads.

In ancient times the inhabitants of Assyria were of varied ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, both Semitic and non-Semitic. Northern Iraq even today is still a mixture of peoples of various languages and

FIG. 1. Map of Assyrian Empire, about 9th century B.C.



religions. Arabic, of course, is the chief tongue, but the Arabic speakers employ numerous dialects. A second Semitic language is Syriac, an ancient East Semitic Aramaic tongue, spoken by the so-called Assyrian Christians. Kurdish, an Indo-European language akin to Persian, is the speech of the Kurds who occupy the mountainous areas in northern and northeastern Iraq. Turki, of which Osmanli Turkish is the chief representative, is another language of the Iraqi north. With regard to religions, there are adherents of three faiths: the majority are Sunni Moslems, but Christian and Yezidi minorities also exist.

The weather may have had a strong influence upon the attitudes and character of the ancient Assyrians. Their land lies in a marginal rainfall belt. In some years there was enough rain; in others there was not. Nor was the land very fertile. Perhaps this may explain in part why the Assyrians were noted warriors. To survive they had to take whatever crops they could not grow or those goods for which they could not trade.

The first attempt at organizing an Assyrian state was made by Shamsi-Adad I, about 1813 B.C. He held sway in Assur for thirty-three years, and even ruled Mari on the Euphrates River through his son, Iasmah-Adad. The two carried on a lively correspondence, not as formal government business but rather as a severe father to a not too diligent son. Shamsi-Adad was succeeded by another son, Ishme-Dagan; but during his rule Assyria was not strong enough to repel Hammurabi of Babylon, who asserted the dominance of the Babylonian south over the Assyrian realm.

For four hundred years the Babylonians enjoyed their supremacy over the north. Then the Hittites from Anatolia defeated the Mitannian-Hurrian coalition in Syria. This defeat in the west of Assyrian territory plus a political weakening in the Babylonian south allowed the Assyrians under Assuruballit I (1366-1330 B.C.) and Tukulti-Ninurta I (1244-1208 B.C.) to gather their strength during what is now called the Middle Assyrian Period.

It was not until the first millennium B.C., however, that Assyria reached the greatness that all students of ancient Near Eastern history recall. The first great Assyrian king in this era was Assurnasirpal II, who ruled from 883 to 859 B.C. It was he who moved his capital to Nimrud, ancient Kalhu, where he undertook a vast building program. To the Nimrud of his day and that of his successors many of the Assyrian objects in The Metropolitan Museum of Art owe their origins.

The ruins of Nimrud are situated on the east bank of the Tigris River, twenty-two miles south of ancient Nineveh and modern Mosul in northern Iraq (Fig. 2). Sherds of Ninevite pottery found in the

southeast corner of the Nimrud acropolis indicate that Nimrud was occupied at least since the early part of the third millennium B.C. But it was not until the beginning of Assurnasirpal II's reign that Kalhu became the capital city of Assyria.

Prior to Assurnasirpal's choice of Nimrud for his new capital, the site had been no more than a provincial town. The inhabitants of Assur, the old tribal capital of Assyria some forty miles to the south and on the opposite bank of the Tigris, and Nineveh, ancient Kouyunjik, another capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, scarcely noticed Nimrud. Both of these cities had been the principal religious and political centers of Assyria since the second millennium B.C. Assurnasirpal II chose Nimrud not only because he wished to make and perpetuate a name for himself but also because he wished to be free of the political and religious intrigues of the two older centers.

FIG. 2. View of citadel at Nimrud with ziggurat in foreground. (Photo courtesy of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq)



Although much smaller than Nineveh, Nimrud nevertheless required a massive mud-brick wall five miles long to surround the citadel and the outer city. Inside these walls is an area of about one and one-half square miles, or approximately nine hundred acres. At the southwest corner of this vast enclosure lies the acropolis, confined to an area of sixty acres (Fig. 3).

Upon this raised fortification stood the temples, palaces, and administrative offices of the empire. Examination of a cross section of the eastern part of the citadel wall reveals that it is 120 feet thick and 42 feet high, a height that originally must have exceeded 50 feet. On the western side of the acropolis, on the ancient bank of the Tigris, a wall of great stone blocks originally topped by mud bricks rises 26 feet above the river bed. In addition to these massive walls and the Tigris River on the west, Nimrud was protected on the south by a great canal dug by Assurnasirpal II, linking Nimrud with the Zab River seven miles distant.

Think of the magnitude of the task – five miles of massive mud-brick walls, plus additional walls around the acropolis, to say nothing of the canal, the new temples, palaces, and administrative buildings!

Although much work remained to be done, in 879 B.C. Assurnasirpal was so pleased with the efforts of his construction crew – gangs of forced laborers and skilled craftsmen – that he gave what should certainly be one of the greatest house-warming parties of all time. According to his own account chiseled on a stone slab discovered in 1951 by archaeologists of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 69,574 persons were his guests. The inscription reports that “the happy peoples of all the lands together with the people of Kalhu for ten days I feasted, wined, bathed, and honored them and sent them back to their homes in peace and joy.”

Nimrud endured for almost three hundred years before it was overwhelmed first in 614 B.C. by the Medes from the east and finally in 612 by a coalition of Medes and Babylonians from southern Mesopotamia. Never again did it return to its former glory. Instead it became at first the shabby home for squatters who survived the Median destruction and afterwards was never more than a provincial village. In fact, in 401 B.C. when Xenophon and his fellow Greeks were returning from their defeat at Cunaxa, near Baghdad, Nimrud was virtually abandoned. The Tigris River had already moved to its present course a mile or so to the west. Finally Nimrud was deserted completely; small villages later sprang up in the adjoining countryside.

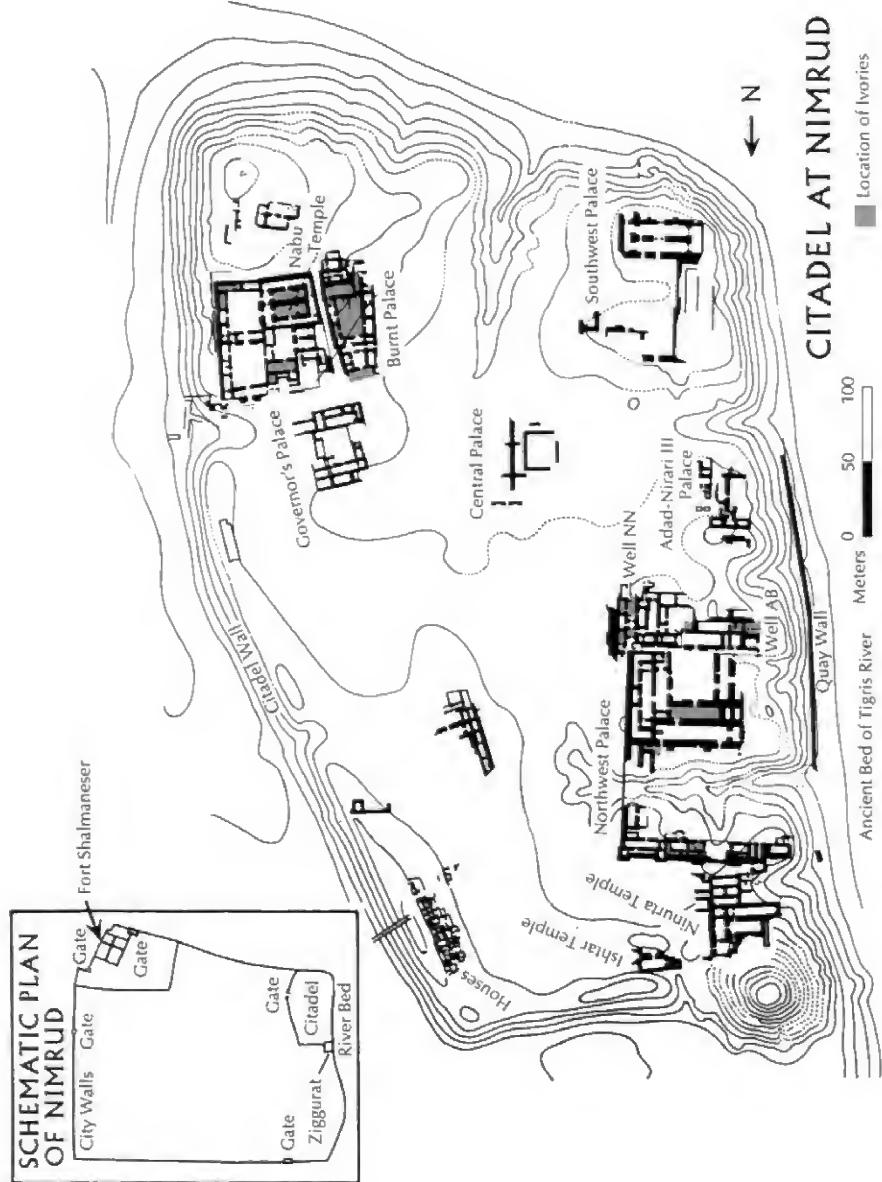


FIG. 3. Contour map of citadel at Nimrud, 1957. (Mallowan, *Nimrud and its Remains I*, p. 32, map 1). Shaded areas show location of ivories. Inset: Schematic plan of Nimrud (adapted from Jacquetta Hawkes, *Atlas of Ancient Archaeology* [New York: McGraw Hill, 1974], p. 183)

It was in just this condition – the mound deserted with small villages nearby – that Sir Austen Henry Layard, its first excavator, found Nimrud, when he arrived on a raft supported by inflated animal skins from Mosul on an evening early in November 1845. He had visited the mound on previous occasions several years earlier, before he had any funds for his excavations. Having gained the support of Sir Stratford Canning, the British ambassador to Constantinople, Layard was ready on the next morning, November 9, 1845, to begin digging at Nimrud.

For much of the next six years, Layard concentrated his main efforts on the Northwest Palace of Assurnasirpal II. There he found official state apartments, with sun-dried mud-brick walls lined by huge stone blocks carved with scenes of figures in relief and inscribed with a record of important events in the king's reign. Although Layard dug at numerous sites, his chief successes were attained at Nimrud and Nineveh. At both of these sites he found great quantities of Assyrian reliefs (Fig. 4). The walls of museums in many countries of the world attest to his successful removal and transporting of these reliefs, first to India and then to Europe.

The British Museum, which supported Layard after his first seasons, continued to fund the productive excavations at Nimrud. Hor-



FIG. 4.

Contemporary watercolor showing Sir Austen Henry Layard directing excavations at Nineveh. He used the dangerous technique of tunneling to save time and money. (Photo courtesy of the British Museum, Original Drawings 4, misc. 7)

muzd Rassam, who had assisted Layard, took over the direction of the excavations from 1852 to 1854. He worked on the citadel both in the central area and in the eastern sector where he uncovered the remains of the Nabu Temple. In 1854 Sir William Kennett Loftus was sent to Nimrud by the British Museum with the support of the Assyrian Exploration Fund. During his work there through 1855, Loftus discovered a new palace, the Southeast or Burnt Palace, on the citadel.

To no single Mesopotamian site do the Ancient Near Eastern galleries of the Metropolitan Museum owe so much as they do to Nimrud. While our number of Assyrian reliefs cannot be compared in quantity or variety to those in the vast halls of the British Museum, we can show our visitors both a fine Assyrian courtyard walled with reliefs and a doorway flanked by two huge winged human-headed beasts, a lion and a bull.

Most of the big reliefs and colossi removed from Nimrud were hauled down to the Tigris on wagons pulled by men, then placed on board giant rafts buoyed by inflated animal skins for their journey hundreds of miles southeast to the Persian Gulf and eventually to ocean-sailing ships and steamers. Other reliefs were dispatched via camel to the Mediterranean Sea and then by ship to their final destinations. (See Dorothea Seelye Franck's essay, "Missionaries Send Bas-Reliefs to the United States.")

In contrast to the massive Assyrian stone reliefs and winged animals, our other chief group of objects from Nimrud are carved ivories, delicate in material, size, and execution. Many of the ivories were found in recent excavations at Nimrud, more than a hundred years after Layard had left the site.

On March 18, 1949, Sir Max E. L. Mallowan (Fig. 5), a distinguished British archaeologist, reopened excavations at Nimrud under the auspices of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq (Fig. 6). From 1951 to 1963 the Metropolitan Museum was a major financial supporter of the work of the British School at Nimrud. Our collection of ivories and other small finds came to us in direct proportion to the extent of our participation. The antiquities law of Iraq at that time provided for the possibility of a division of finds by foreign expeditions.

Mallowan's prime objectives were to uncover and complete the plans of palaces and temples found by his predecessors and to excavate in areas previously untouched on the citadel and in the lower town. During the 1957 season attention shifted to Fort Shalmaneser

at the southeast corner of the great wall surrounding the outer city (Fig. 7). Fort Shalmaneser was built, as implied by the name its excavators gave it, by Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.), son of Assurnasirpal II (Fig. 8). In this fort the Assyrian armies were mustered, equipped, trained, and sent out on their annual campaigns. To Fort Shalmaneser the booty of these campaigns was first brought when the armies returned to the Assyrian capital.

Many major works of art, including stone sculptures, ivory carvings, bronzes, cylinder and stamp seals, and a number of cuneiform tablets, were discovered during the thirteen years of excavation at Nimrud under Mallowan's direction and that of David Oates and Jeffrey J. Orchard. During the last decade the Iraq Department of Antiquities and the Polish Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology in Cairo have continued excavations on the citadel mound. Restoration of some of the palace and temple buildings is in progress.



FIG. 5.  
Sir Max Mallowan  
supervising the excava-  
tion of a mud-brick  
pavement at Nimrud.  
(Photo courtesy of  
Joan Oates)



FIG. 6.  
Fallen relief slabs as  
found by Mallowan in  
Gate D of Northwest  
Palace. (Photo courtesy  
of the British School of  
Archaeology in Iraq)

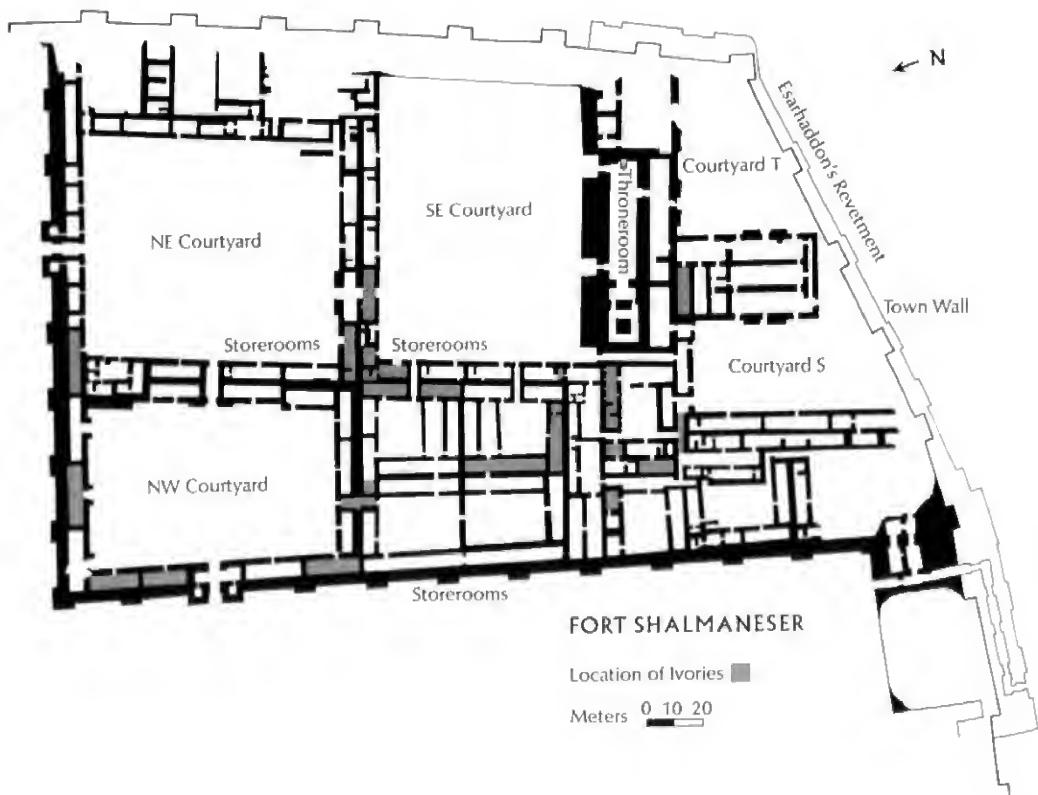
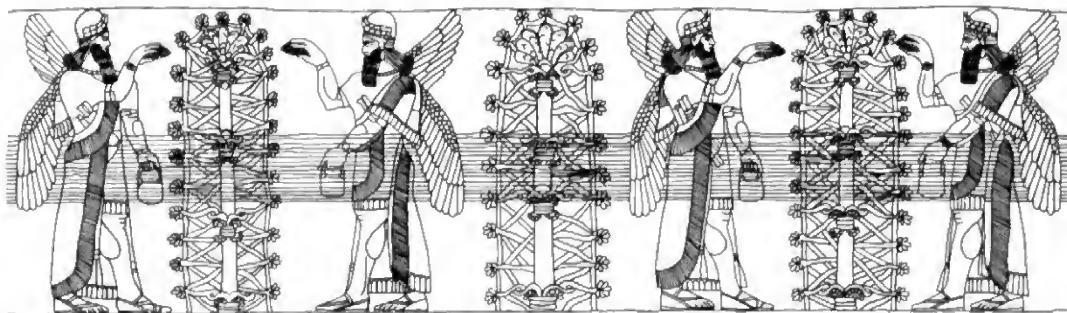


FIG. 7. Plan of Fort Shalmaneser (from Mallowan, *Nimrud and its Remains*, maps, VIII). Shaded areas show location of ivories

FIG. 8. Low relief carving on edge of throne base, Fort Shalmaneser, showing Shalmaneser III (right) sealing an agreement with Marduk-zakir-shumi, subservient king of Babylon. (Photo courtesy of Prudence O. Harper)





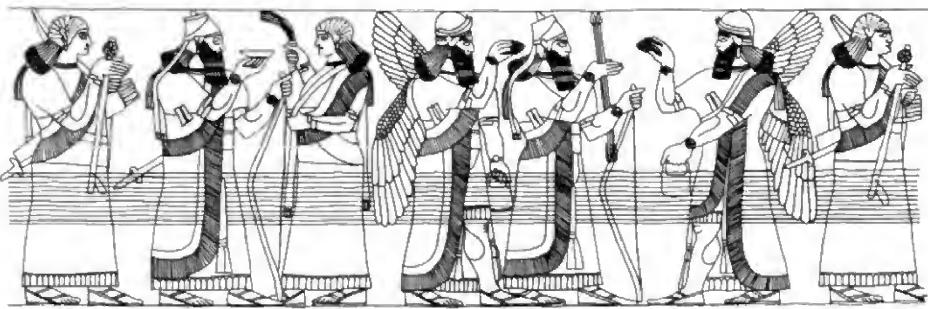
## Room C

# THE RELIEFS

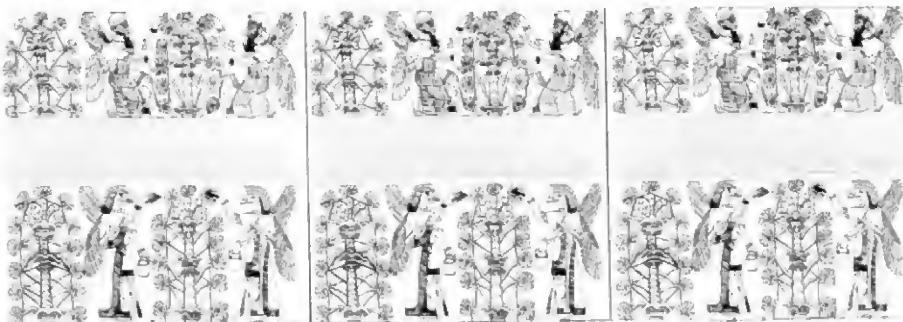
In both southern and northern Mesopotamia there was a long tradition of embellishing the palace walls with figural compositions and decorative patterns. Before the Neo-Assyrian period, such ornamentation was either painted directly onto the wall plaster or composed of bricks molded in relief. Assurnasirpal was the first Assyrian ruler to augment these traditional forms of architectural decoration with huge limestone wall panels carved in low relief. This form of decoration, which had its origins in North Syria and Hittite Anatolia, was so effective that it became an essential element of palace decoration throughout the period of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

### The Official Rooms of the Northwest Palace

The reliefs in the Metropolitan Museum come from a number of rooms in the central portion of the Northwest Palace, where the state apartments were located (Figs. 9, 10). Around the walls of these



Room G



Room I

FIG. 9. Original appearance of relief series in Rooms C, G, and I, Northwest Palace. (Rooms C and G reliefs from drawings by R. Sobolewski)

rooms, a single subject was repeated many times. Sometimes the subject was complete on one block of stone as in Room I. In other instances two or more blocks formed a single unit of design, as in Room G where the king appears with attendants and divinities. In Room C, benevolent winged beings attend the sacred tree. These divinities and those with a bird's head were also placed in or beside doorways. Only in the rooms decorated with hunting and battle scenes did the subject matter take the form of a changing narrative around the walls, but there are no examples of these subjects in the Museum's collection.

The official rooms in the palace had different functions. Room B, the throne room, is entered through doorways guarded by colossal



1. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 32.143.12



2. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 32.143.14



5. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 32.143.6



10. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan 17.190.2081  
In doorway between Courtyard Y and  
Room S



11. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan 17.190.2077  
In doorway between Courtyard Y and  
Room S



12. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan 17.190.2078  
In doorway between Courtyard Y and  
Room S



15. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 31.72.2  
In doorway between Rooms S and T



17. Gift of Benjamin Brewster 84.11



18. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan 17.190.2082



8. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 32.143.7  
On west jamb of doorway



9. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan 17.190.2080  
In doorway between Courtyard Y and  
Room S



13. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan 17.190.2079



20. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 32.143.8

FIG. 10.

Original locations in Northwest Palace of the Metropolitan Museum reliefs. For no. 6, see Fig. 13; no. 4, Fig. 14; no. 3, Fig. 15; no. 14, Fig. 16; no. 16, Fig. 17; no. 7, Fig. 18; no. 19, Fig. 23

NORTHWEST PALACE

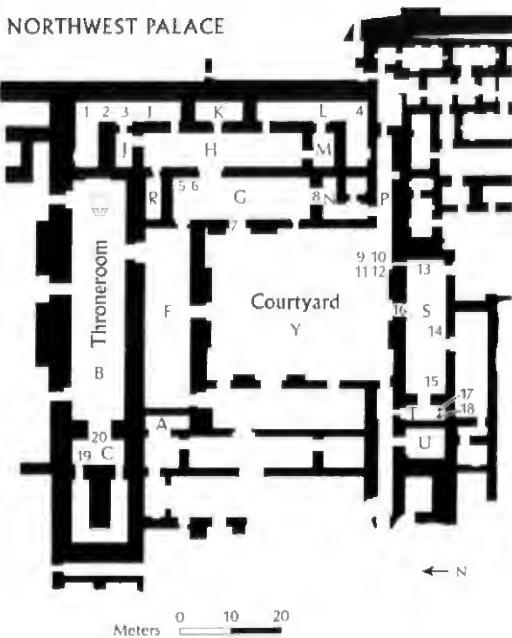




FIG. 11. Watercolor, possibly by Frederick Charles Cooper, showing entrance to Ninurta Temple. Layard left the guardian figures in place because they were too massive to move, leaving them to be reexcavated by Mallowan. (Photo courtesy of the British Museum, *Original Drawings 2*, pl. 55, bottom)

creatures, as those in Figure 11. It contains reliefs with battle, hunting, and ritual scenes and has a large throne base. The reliefs in Room G are particularly fine in execution; this centrally located room was probably an important reception or audience hall leading to the open Courtyard Y. Room I, which has unusual stone floor slabs and wall niches in some places, may have been a place for ceremonies requir-



FIG. 12.  
Corridor P, Northwest Palace, lined with undecorated slabs inscribed with Assurnasirpal's Standard Inscription. (Photo courtesy of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq)

ing bathing and cleansing. The walls of some of the corridors and smaller storage rooms had undecorated limestone slabs with only the Standard Inscription carved across their surface (Fig. 12).

## The Images Carved on the Reliefs

**Figure 13. King and attendant.** A conical cap with a small peak and a long diadem form the royal headdress. The king holds a bow, a sign of his power as “the king of the world, king of Assyria,” and a bowl perhaps signifying his role as a spiritual leader, “the chief priest of Assur.” He is attended by court officials and eunuchs, who carry his weapons, a fly whisk, and a ladle. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 32.143.4



**Figure 14. Human-headed divinity.** Winged human-headed divinities stand on either side of the king and before the sacred tree, administering some purifying substance with a date-palm spathe and a bucket. They also appear in doorways where some hold a plant, animal, or weapon. Most of the divinities wear a horned cap but there are also winged beings who wear only a circlet wound around with hair. These figures usually hold a bucket and raise the open right hand in a gesture. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 31.72.1





**Figure 15. Sacred tree.** Repeated on many reliefs throughout the state apartments, the tree is composed of ornamental leaves and waterlike curling tendrils. This tree is a common motif in Assyrian art and symbolizes vegetal life and fertility. The tree is attended by both human-headed and bird-headed divinities. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 32.143.3



**Figure 16. Bird-headed divinity.** “Furnished with faces of birds and wings, carrying in their right hand a purifier and in their left a ritual cup,” the *apkalle* of Babylonian ritual texts protected the house from evil spirits. On the reliefs, bird-headed divinities stand at the doorway and attend the sacred tree. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 31.72.3

**Figure 17. Human-headed winged bull.** "Beasts of the mountains and the seas which I fashioned out of white limestone and alabaster I had set up in the palace gates." The commonest type of gate guardian in Neo-Assyrian palaces is the human-headed winged bull. Colossal in size, this supernatural creature wears a rounded cap with horns symbolizing his divine nature. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 32.143.1



**Figure 18. Human-headed winged lion.** In the palace of Assurnasirpal II pairs of human-headed winged lions as well as bulls decorated and supported the gateways. The lion creature wears the horned cap of divinity and a belt signifying his superhuman power. The Assyrian sculptor gave these guardian figures five legs. Viewed from the front, the animal stands firmly in place; from the side he appears to stride forward. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 32.143.2



## Color

In the dimly lit chambers of the Northwest Palace, illuminated through open doors and perhaps clerestory windows and by torch-light, color was used to enliven the images carved on the stone panels that lined the walls. When Layard first uncovered the reliefs, he saw traces of black, white, red, and blue paint on their surfaces; today all but blue are still visible. Layard reports that he found color only on certain parts of the relief decoration, suggesting that a selective application of these colors was used to define and strengthen the outline of each figure.

Thick, black, probably bituminous paint colored the curly Assyrian hair and the long beards of divinities and kings; their eyes were white with black pupils (Fig. 19); and the tongues of the bird-headed divinities were colored a brilliant red. A garland with red flowers encircles the hair of some human-headed divinities. No traces of paint remain on the garments of the figures, but often their armlets and bracelets are red and their sandals are black, occasionally having red soles and straps. Sometimes red is preserved on the daggers and the bows held by the king or his attendant, adding a strong vertical accent to the repeated series of figures (Fig. 20).

FIG. 19. Hair and beards of winged divinities were colored with black paint; eyes were colored white with black pupil. (Photo courtesy of Corethia Qualls)

FIG. 20. Many of Layard's drawings of reliefs record incised patterns on garments. The enthroned king and his attendants in Room G wear garments ornamented with elaborate figural and floral designs. (Photo courtesy of the British Museum, *Original Drawings* 3, pl. 43)



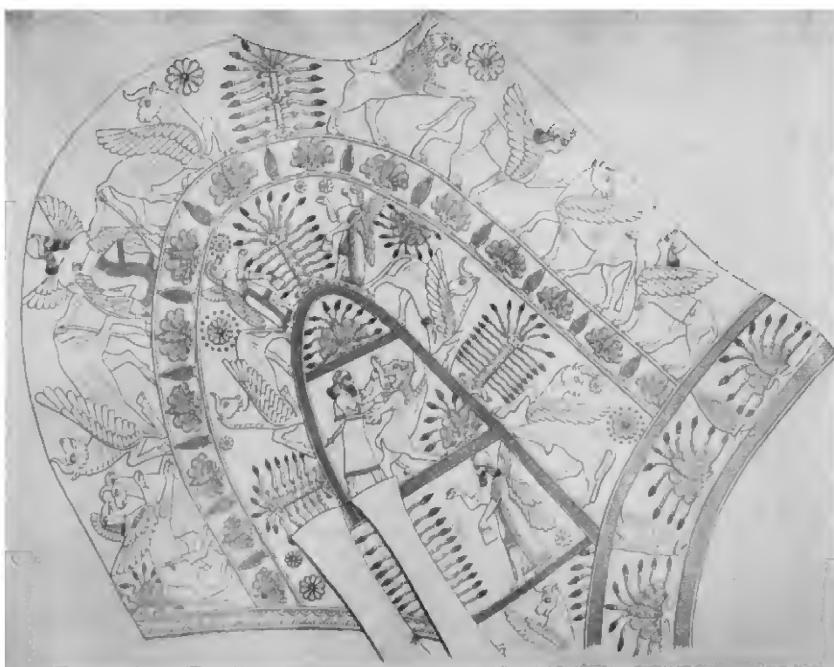
The same four colors were used much more freely on the mud-brick walls above the reliefs, which were plastered and painted with floral, geometric, and figural designs. In the domestic quarters of the palace, similar patterns were painted above scenes of processions of attendants outlined in black paint on a blue background.

## Garment Patterns

In many of the rooms of Assurnasirpal's palace, the figures carved on the reliefs wear garments embellished by figural, floral, and geometric patterns incised in the stone. While excavating, Layard recognized the importance of these carved decorations and included many of them in his detailed line drawings of the reliefs. These drawings, although idealized, are important because in some cases they are the only existing record of a relief or its decoration.

The figures carved on the panels in Room G, probably an important

FIG. 21. Pattern incised on shoulder of royal robe in Fig. 13. (Drawing by Layard, *The Monuments of Nineveh*, pl. 8)



**FIG. 22.**  
Detail, Fig. 13: incised  
floral pattern on edge of  
attendant's sleeve



audience hall, wear the most elaborately decorated garments (Fig. 20). There the king, shown with his attendants and winged divinities, is robed in a royal garment resplendent with figural representations, many reproducing scenes on the reliefs themselves: divinities facing trees, the king with his attendants, and scenes of hunting and warfare (Fig. 21). Other images incised on his garment show themes common on the Assyrian ivories and glyptic art, among them kneeling caprids and running winged human-headed creatures.

The garments of the divinities and the king's attendants have simpler figural decoration confined to the borders and hems of their robes; their tunic sleeves and neckbands have rows of alternating buds and lotuses or palmettes (Fig. 22). In other rooms of the palace, simple geometric patterns of concentric squares, rosettes, and hexagons were used to decorate the garments of figures (Fig. 23).

The incised figural patterns are organized in symmetrically composed units that occur frequently in varying combinations (Fig. 24). Such arrangements suggest that the artist copied the designs from patterns already existing. These incised patterns may imitate metal or fabric appliqués that were sewn onto garments, or designs that were embroidered on textiles used in antiquity.



FIG. 23. Human-headed divinity wearing robe with incised geometric decoration. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 32.143.11

**FIG. 24.**  
Garment pattern on border of royal robe in Fig. 13. (Drawing by Joan Aruz)



## The Standard Inscription

Across the surface of each large stone relief panel that lined the walls of the Northwest Palace was carved an inscription (Figs. 13-16). This text is now called the Standard Inscription because it is repeated with only minor variations on each of the relief slabs. It is written in the Neo-Assyrian dialect of Akkadian, a Semitic language written from left to right in a wedged-shaped script called cuneiform, after the Latin word for wedge (*cuneus*). Each of these cuneiform signs denotes an individual syllable.

The Standard Inscription describes the reign of Assurnasirpal II: his role as the priest and ruler chosen by the gods and his royal lineage, his successful military campaigns, and the royal building activity in the city of Kalhu. Throughout the text, Assurnasirpal is lauded as the invincible ruler of Assyria, the king of the world. The translation that follows is adapted from Samuel M. Paley, *King of the World: Ashurnasir-pal II of Assyria 883-859 B.C.* (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1976), pp. 125-144.

### [Location]

The palace of Assurnasirpal,

### [Lineage of the King]

chief priest of Assur, the chosen one of Enlil and Ninurta, the favorite of Anu and Dagan, the divine weapon of the Great Gods, the potent king, the king of the world, the king of Assyria;

the son of Tukulti-Ninurta, the great king, the potent king, the king of the world, the king of Assyria;

the son of Adad-nirari, the king of the world, the king of Assyria;

### [The Heroic Warrior]

the powerful warrior who always lives by (his) trust in Assur, his lord; who has no rival among the princes of the four quarters of the earth;

(who is) the shepherd of his people, fearless in battle, the overpowering tidewater who has no opponent;

(who is) the king, subjugator of the unsubmitting, who rules the total sum of all humanity;

(who is) the potent warrior, who tramples his enemies, who crushes all the adversaries;

(who is) the disperser of the host of the haughty;

(who is) the king who always lives by (his) trust in the Great Gods, his lords;

and captured all the lands himself, ruled all their mountainous districts,

(and) received their tribute;

who takes hostages, who establishes victory over all their lands.

### **[Summary of the Campaign]**

When Assur, who selected me, who made my kingship great, entrusted his merciless weapon into my lordly arms,

I verily struck down the widespread troops of Lullumu with weapons, during the battle encounter.

As for the troops of the lands of Nairi, Habhu, Shubaru, and Nirbu, I roared over them like Adad the destroyer, with the aid of Shamash and Adad, my helper gods.

(I am) the king who caused (the lands) from the other bank of the Tigris to the Lebanon and the Great Sea, the whole of Laqu, and Suhu as far as Rapiqu, to submit;

(who) himself conquered (the territory) from the source of the (Subnat River to Urartu);

(who) annexed as my own territory (the area) from the pass of Kirruru to Gilzanu,

from the other bank of the Lower Zab to Til Bari which is upstream from Zaban,

from Til sha Abtani to Til sha Zabdani.

I counted as my own people (those who occupy the territory) from the pass of Babite to Hashmar.

I set my resident (official)s in the lands over which I ruled (and imposed upon them) obeisance and (forced labor).

### **[The King as Warrior and Protector of His People]**

(I am) Assurnasirpal,

the obedient prince, the worshiper of the Great Gods,

the fierce dragon, the conqueror of all cities and mountains to their full extent,

the king of rulers, who tames the dangerous enemies, the (one) crowned with glory, the (one) unafraid of battle,  
the relentless lion, who shakes resistance,  
the king (deserving) of praise,  
the shepherd, protection of the world,  
the king whose command blots out mountains and seas,  
who forced into compliance the relentless, fierce kings from the East to the West, at his very approach.

### [The City]

The former Kalhu, which Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, the lord my predecessor, built –  
that city was dilapidated and deserted. I built that city anew.

As for my own captives from the lands over which I ruled – those from Suhu, the whole of Laqu, Sirqu which is on the opposite bank of the Euphrates-crossing, all Zamua, Bit Adini, and Hattu, and that of Lubarna of Hattina – I took and settled them therein.

I removed the ancient tell. I went down as far as the headwaters.

I laid in 120 brick courses into the depths. (From (the level of) the headwaters, I made a fill 120 brick courses up to the top.)

### [The Palace]

I built thereon (a palace with) halls of cedar, cypress, juniper, boxwood, teak, terebinth, and tamarisk(?) as my royal dwelling and for the enduring leisure life of my lordship.

Beasts of the mountains and the seas, which I had fashioned out of white limestone and alabaster, I had set up in its gates. I made it (the palace) fittingly imposing. I bordered them all around with bronze studs. I mounted doors of cedar, cypress, juniper, and terebinth in its gates.

Silver, gold, tin, bronze, iron, my own booty from the lands over which I ruled, as much as possible, I brought (to the palace); I placed it all therein.

# IVORY CARVINGS FOUND AT NIMRUD

**E**lephant ivory was treasured in antiquity as a rare and beautiful material. During the almost three hundred years of Assyrian supremacy, sumptuously carved ivory objects and wooden furniture inlaid with decorated ivory panels adorned the royal apartments. From the first days of Layard's excavations at Nimrud, such ivory carvings were found in large numbers scattered throughout the broken mud brick. During Mallowan's excavations, thousands of ivories, both whole and fragmentary, were carefully recovered from the rooms of the palaces, temples, and private houses on the citadel and from the chambers of Fort Shalmaneser (Fig. 25). These ivories were then painstakingly reconstructed and restored.

Particularly fine ivories were discovered at the bottom of two wells in the southern wing of the Northwest Palace, one in Room NN and the other in Room AB, where they were thrown during the destruction of Nimrud (Fig. 26). The only ivories left undisturbed by the armies that sacked Nimrud were the remains of a group of nineteen

FIG. 25. Tents in Fort Shalmaneser kept the sun from those areas where large groups of ivories were found. (Photo courtesy of Prudence O. Harper)



chairs with curved backs decorated with carved ivory panels. These had been carefully stacked in Room SW<sub>7</sub> of Fort Shalmaneser, most probably by the survivors of the first destruction of Nimrud in 614 B.C.

Originally much of the carved surface of the ivories was covered with gold leaf. Little remains of the precious metal today because when the Medes descended on Nimrud, they stripped away the gold before throwing the ivories, worthless to them, aside into a heap or down a well.

FIG. 26. Many important ivories were thrown into Well NN, Northwest Palace, during destruction of Nimrud. (Photo courtesy of Vaughn E. Crawford)



## Styles

Many of the ivories found at Nimrud were brought there as booty or tribute from vassal states to the west of Assyria where elephants were native and ivory carving was a long-established craft. Other ivories were carved at the Assyrian capital either by local craftsmen or by craftsmen deported from their homes in the west to work in the royal workshops. This variety in craft traditions is reflected in the iconography and style of the images carved on the ivories.

Three styles of ivory carving have been identified, each corresponding to a region within the Assyrian realm: a local Assyrian style, a Syrian style, and a Phoenician style. Many of the ivories from Nimrud

can be assigned to one of these regional styles. Others combine elements of these styles with motifs that originated during the second millennium B.C. in the Aegean, particularly in Cyprus and Mycenae.

**Assyrian style.** The Assyrian craftsmen often cut ivory in flat strips that were nailed to furniture as decoration. Carved on them by an incised line or in low relief are subjects known on the stone bas-reliefs of the Assyrian palaces, including scenes of warfare, processions, and divinities approaching the sacred tree. Carvings of animals were sometimes sculpted in high relief by the Assyrian craftsmen (Fig. 27).

FIG. 27. Carved ivory lion head. Assyrian style. Found in Fort Shalmaneser, Room T10. British School of Archaeology in Iraq and Rogers Fund, 62.269.1





FIG. 28.

Ivory panel with warrior holding tendrils; above, winged sun-disc; below, crouching lion. Syrian style. Found in Room SW7, Fort Shalmaneser. British School of Archaeology in Iraq and Rogers Fund, 59.107.7



FIG. 29.

Ivory furniture support with four carved caryatid figures. Syrian style. Found in throne room, Burnt Palace, Citadel. British School of Archaeology in Iraq and Rogers Fund, 52.23.2

**Syrian style.** Ivories in the Syrian style include both flat panels used for furniture decoration and such three-dimensional objects as pyxides, hand bowls, and small figures. All of the panels for chair-backs found in Room SW7 of Fort Shalmaneser belong to the Syrian group. Typical of this style are figures with oval faces having a large nose and eyes, a small mouth, and a receding chin; plants with a long wavy stem; and a winged sun disc with pendant volute curls. Unlike the symmetrical composition of Phoenician ivories, Syrian examples often show single figures in profile that completely fill the surface of the plaque (Fig. 28).

Nude female figures wearing elaborately curled tresses and diadems, sculpted in the round either singly or in groups, are particularly striking examples of the Syrian style of ivory carving (Fig. 29).

**Phoenician style.** The Phoenician ivory carvers were strongly influenced by the themes and style of Egyptian art, due to a traditionally close connection between Egypt and Phoenicia, which was located on the southern coast of the Levant. Some Phoenician ivories illustrate purely Egyptian themes, such as the child-god Horus. But many use Egyptian motifs in entirely original compositions: the striding ram-headed sphinx carried by two attendants or the winged hero wearing the crown of Upper and Lower Egypt and spearing a griffin.

Phoenician ivories were used primarily as furniture decoration. Some are solid plaques while others are carved on one or both sides in a delicate openwork technique. Many were originally covered by gold leaf and inlaid with semiprecious stones or colored glass. Such a rich combination of ivory, gold, and brightly colored stones made the thrones of the Assyrian kings famous in antiquity for their exquisite beauty (Fig. 30).

FIG. 30.  
Carved ivory panel with  
cloisonné design. Phoenician  
style. Found in Room SW37,  
Fort Shalmaneser. British  
School of Archaeology in Iraq  
and Rogers Fund, 61.197.1



# MISSIONARIES SEND BAS-RELIEFS TO THE UNITED STATES

Dorothea Seelye Franck

Dorothea Seelye Franck is a descendant of the Reverend William Frederic Williams, an American missionary to Assyria in the middle of the nineteenth century. Reverend Williams was responsible for the acquisition of a number of Assyrian reliefs from Nimrud for various American institutions. Mrs. Franck bases her account of this chapter in the history of the Assyrian palace sculptures on letters written by the Reverend and Mrs. Williams to family and friends in America. Mrs. Franck and her family have spent considerable time in the Near East; her brother, Talcott Williams Seelye, is currently the United States Ambassador to Syria.

*"It did seem rather odd, to say nothing more sentimental than that we Yankees from young America should be gazing upon the very slabs which lined the palaces of those ancient Assyrians."*

These were the words of my missionary great-grandmother Sarah Pond Williams, in a letter of April 6, 1853, to her family in central New York. She was describing the awesome bas-reliefs decorating the great hall of the Northwest Palace of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud. Buried for twenty-five centuries, the palace had been located in 1845 by Austen Henry Layard, an enterprising young amateur archaeologist from Great Britain. At that time the area now known as Iraq was still part of the centuries-old Ottoman Turkish Empire, whose sultans in distant Constantinople held uneasy sway over the multitude of diverse tribal and religious groups. Through the British ambassador to Constantinople, Sir Stratford Canning, and Colonel Henry C. Rawlinson, the British Resident in Baghdad, British archaeologists received permission from the Ottoman court to work at Nimrud.

Meanwhile the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions, Boston, received permission from the Ottoman authorities to open a mission station in Mosul to work with the ancient Oriental

FIG. 31.

Reverend William Frederic Williams and his wife, Sarah Pond Williams. (Photo courtesy of Dorothea Seelye Franck)



churches. In 1850, the Reverend and Mrs. Dwight Marsh started the new "mission to the Assyrians." They were joined in the next years by Doctor and Mrs. Henry Lobdell and by the Reverend William Frederic Williams of Utica, New York, and his wife Sarah, of neighboring Rome (Fig. 31).

Reverend Williams, called Frederic, was a graduate of Auburn Theological Seminary. He married Sarah Dennison Pond in 1848. In 1851, they embarked on a sailing ship for the three-month voyage to Beirut, then part of the Ottoman Empire, where two children, Talcott and Cornelia (the author's grandmother) were born to them. From Beirut the family took a caravan trip to Aleppo and then east to Mosul to join the others at the mission post.

Frederic, in an undated family letter (1853), describes the bas-reliefs in the Northwest Palace:

The slabs of this new palace are as beautiful as at the moment the artist complacently said, "It is finished!" ... The most extensive is of a hunting scene in which the king is represented in his chariot contending with the noblest of game—the lion, one having turned at bay has seized the wheel of the chariot, with mane erect, eyes flashing, is crushing it with his teeth while the king, impassive as always, is coolly spitting him with his spear... In another scene the king is mounting his chariot,

the hands of the driver holding the reins, inimitably done in high relief and the ornaments of the king's breastplate, the end of the axle, the tongue of the chariot, minute miniatures of two figures worshipping the sacred tree as represented on the cylinders [Layard's *Nineveh and Babylon*]...

In a letter of June 15, 1853, to his friend Reverend Leonard Bacon, New Haven, Frederic explains the arrangement of the reliefs:

Arranged as a wainscotting alternating a figure and a tree – the figures facing each other by couplets – of course the contrary couplets back to back. The sculpturing was done after the stones were in place (as in Baalbek) and the figure occupying the center of the slab – a half tree was on each side of it and thus the points of the stone passed through the center of the tree.

Two kinds of friendly competition are reflected in the story behind the first Assyrian bas-reliefs sent to the United States. First was the international rivalry between the French vice-consul Paul Botta, excavating at Khorsabad on behalf of the French government, and Layard, supported by Rawlinson, excavating at Nimrud for the British. Each man was eager to acquire outstanding items, for the Louvre and the British Museum respectively. All three men had a scholarly interest as well, with Rawlinson the first to decipher cuneiform writing.

The second rivalry was between the American missionaries themselves, over who would be the recipients of the bas-reliefs given to the United States by the British. Marsh pushed for his alma mater, Williams College, and Lobdell for his, Amherst College. All of the Americans welcomed the reliefs as proof of biblical history, for Nimrud is the ancient site of Calah, mentioned in Genesis 10:11. Frederic's journal entry of September 13, 1852, begins:

I am very much in the condition of the man who raffled for an elephant. Colonel [Henry] Rawlinson writes me that the trustees [presumably of the British Museum] have given me as many slabs as I will choose to remove from Nimrud.

So Frederic started soliciting American institutions, but to his great frustration the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., and the State Geology Hall, Albany, among others, expressed no interest in the slabs. However, Laurens Hickok, president of Union College, Schenectady, replied by enclosing three hundred dollars for expenses. Two slabs from Union College are now at the Metropolitan Museum

(Fig. 10, no. 15, 31.72.2; Fig. 16, 31.72.3; Gifts of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.). Another enthusiast was Leonard Bacon, on behalf of Yale University, where Frederic had spent one undergraduate year. In his letter of June 15, 1853, Frederic writes:

The French were in ahead of us and got five slabs and we found only three varieties left. Dr. Lobdell on behalf of Amherst insisted upon having an equal chance with Yale and Union. We, of course, could not go to the mound as rival claimants and so as one party we brought away six slabs and divided them into three lots as evenly as we could and then I chose first for Yale, second for Union, and the third went to Amherst.

A shipment of eighteen slabs was sent out, perhaps in 1855, including one for Williams's alma mater, Auburn. This slab was later purchased by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and subsequently given to the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 14, 31.72.1).

FIG. 32. Watercolor, perhaps by Layard, showing Layard and Rassam at Nimrud directing removal of portal figure for shipment to England. The British Museum, London, Gift of Miss J. du Cane. (Photo courtesy of British Museum)



The procedure involved in selecting the massive bas-reliefs, cutting them, transporting them to Mosul, and shipping them overseas was extremely arduous and time-consuming (Fig. 32). But the work was not without its joys. Sarah's journal entry of April 6, 1853, reports the lively family trip from Mosul to Nimrud, made in six hours, and the camping out at the site:

We made quite a little caravan, Dr. [Lobdell] and his wife on horses, I on my nice donkey, three men servants each on a mule, two carrying a child before him. Miriam, my little [foster] girl on another on top of two immense saddle bags and then other mules carrying bedding and tents.... Mr. [Hormuzd] Rassam, the gentleman in charge of the excavations...made arrangements to be there too.... About nine in the morning...we rode over to the mounds. Many of the large sculptures were open, as Frederic has had permission to remove some to America....

She describes the children's play around the ruins, and concludes:

It seemed to me that what they called their libraries would be most interesting, that is if we could only read those strange characters. Those rooms are lined with large slabs thickly covered with inscription. Of course, Col. Rawlinson and even some other learned folk pretend to read these but I have my doubts about it. Seems more to me like our Great Humbug than anything that has come out these later years.

The problems of selecting reliefs for shipment to the United States are revealed in the 1853 letters of Frederic to Bacon concerning the several slabs destined for Yale. Foreign competition extended not only to quantity but to quality as well. Royal images were especially desired, as evidenced in the June 15 letter:

Neither the Frenchman nor we got a King as there is said not to be one left. Mr. Rassam has a set dressed and ready for packing in *whole* slabs which he wishes to sell delivered at Nimroud at £100 per slab – a King, a Eunuch, a Fillet, a Horned Head, a Nisroch [bird-headed divinity].... As I wrote you...there will be no Kings and a great scarcity of all other kinds except the winged divinities...there were found 5 kings... but if we shall be able to get any is at least doubtful. What can be done honorably shall not be left undone. At present all taking of slabs is interdicted. There has been some rascality about our not finding Kings and Eunuchs.

For packing and shipping, the slabs were reduced from a foot or more in thickness to a few inches. They were divided into three sections, wrapped in native felt, boxed, wrapped again, and tied with firm rope. Frederic wrote Bacon in the June 15 letter:

When, after a good deal of hesitation I decided to saw them, I acted upon the best information I could get and on the principle that a lesser injury was better than to risk the contingency of absolute ruin.... If you put the stones together with a cement of its own color, it will be easy for any "cute" stone cutter with a graver to restore them perfectly to their state before they were sawed.... I have taken the utmost pains in packing.... The wool in which they are packed costs here 3 cents a pound. I guess it will sell for that in Connecticut.

Williams, Lobdell, and Marsh agonized over choosing the least dangerous route for the shipments – whether, as with Marsh's first shipment to Williams College, the packages should be carried by camel caravan across the desert to the port of Iskenderun in the northeast corner of the Mediterranean, or whether, following procedures of the British and French, they should be loaded on rafts to float down the Tigris River to the port of Basra on the Persian Gulf and thence carried by ship around the Cape of Good Hope. Frederic chose the first option, writing to Bacon on October 4, 1853:

The best information I could obtain of a purser employed between Baghdad and Basrah, I dare not run the risks of their entire loss at Baghdad, Basrah or Bombay.

Frederic estimated the cost of transporting a slab from Nimrud to its United States destination as between sixty and ninety dollars. On July 1, 1853, Frederic wrote his stepmother in Utica:

Tomorrow I send out of my yard thirty-nine boxes of antiquities destined to the U. States – twelve boxes to Yale College, nine to Union, ten to Amherst.... The labor and care and trouble I have had first and last I don't care to say much about. My only hope is that they will reach their destination and in good order, of which owing to rumors of war from the north, I have many fears.

Frederic had little more understanding of the ultimate significance of the Assyrian findings than his wife Sarah did. The curiosities were considered worth sharing with friends and relatives as well as with colleges. Sarah's journal entries of March 3 and 22, 1853, describes the operations in their Mosul home, including the allocation of miscellaneous items to an assortment of people in central New York:

I have just been out into the outer court with Frederic in regard to Nimroud specimens as to which we shall send to whom. I selected a seal this morning for Tom [her brother]. I hope he will like it as well as the big foot.... [To] Jo Dennison I am going to send a hand holding a sort of pail part of which is gone. There is a great deal of inscription on this

and the part of the fringe to a dress. They are both parts of the [relief with the] fine head which we sent to Utica.

In an undated family letter she gives further details:

I have just come from the study where Frederic and I have been labelling the inscriptions.... You must all put your wits together & try to read them. We have spent no little time & strength, or rather Frederic has in having them cut into shape.... The marble saws as easily as wood.

In his long letter of July 1, 1853, to his stepmother, Frederic outlined which pieces were designated for whom:

Coming into possession of a perfect head of one of the Nimroud deities I am determined to send it to you & to Sophia.... It is  $\frac{1}{3}$  of a winged deity (see picture of Layard [*Nineveh and Its Remains*,] Vol. I, p. 118...) & in perfect preservation.... Besides this... I have sent a fragment of the same figure to each of you – a part of the fringed dress to Sophia & a part of the "sacred tree" (see [*Nineveh and Its Remains*,] Vol. II p. 233... for a picture of it only) as Layard calls it, to which the deity is presenting or from which is taking a cone. In the one I send the cone is attached to the tree.

In his exhaustive study *Reliefs from the Palace of Assurnasirpal II*, John B. Stearns concludes that between 1850 and 1860 the five American missionaries sent back to the United States at least fifty-five figures from the Northwest Palace. Forty-three more were added later, some of which were acquired by the Metropolitan Museum from the heirs of Layard.

Sarah Pond Williams died in Mosul in 1856, leaving Frederic a widower with three small children. Frederic died in Mardin, Turkey, in 1871. He met his master regretting that he had not brought more souls to God. But, as one of the several missionary-archaeologists in the Near East, his memory lives on in the slabs he secured for the United States, including those three now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum.

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